The potential and perils of pluralism in culturally and politically-inflected economic geography

Abstract

Engaging the *Geographies of Dissociation* in the spirit of constructive dialogue and debate, this commentary recognises its contributions and raises issues and questions relating to the potential and perils of pluralism, value, the material and the symbolic, and uneven geographical development and its politics. Building on the claim that pluralism needs to be a means to greater explanation and understanding rather than an end in and of itself, it argues for a more balanced culturally and politically-grounded economic geography

Keywords: pluralism, economic geography, cultural political economy, geographical political economy

Oliver Ibert *et al.* (this issue) should be congratulated for producing an ambitious, novel and worthwhile contribution. *Geographies of dissociation* identifies a genuinely neglected and under-studied but important area of economic-geographical inquiry. It identifies and elaborates the social and spatial constructions of economic value across different registers, and makes a meaningful distinction and contribution in identifying, defining and elaborating discrete as well as sometimes inter-related

practices and processes of association and dissociation. The approach advances an actor-oriented perspective, emphasising the agency of those involved and the ways in which both association and dissociation processes are constantly in motion; unresolved, incomplete and partial phenomena that require ongoing work. Such a view ensures recognition that value is created and destroyed by a range of inter-related actors in socio-spatial and institutional settings; not only producers but consumers, circulators and regulators too (Pike 2015).

Analytically, the paper helpfully identifies and explains the strategies, practices and techniques of actors involved in dissociating. It reveals that such agency involves ingenious, subtle and sometimes cruder ways of managing and seeking to influence the perceptions of a wider web of actors. A convincing understanding is provided of the geographical constitution and expression of dissociation in scalar/territorial *and* relational/networked terms and uneven geographical development (although is topological confused with topographical in the section on 'physical and topological space'?) The conclusion acknowledges the need for empirical work to test and challenge such conceptions and identifies some potential future directions for a research agenda in this area.

In the spirit of constructive dialogue and debate and befitting an ambitious and novel contribution, there are several issues and questions raised by the paper concerning the potential and perils of pluralism, value, the material and the

symbolic, and uneven geographical development and its politics. The paper's motivation and aim speak to a broader concern with pluralism that has animated economic geography over the past decade (see, for example, Barnes and Sheppard 2010, Hassink *et al.* 2014, Jones 2016). While acknowledging the fundamental differences in ontology, epistemology, levels of abstraction and foci, the argument made is that bringing together multiple ideas and perspectives from Science and Technology Studies, political economy and Neo-Marxism (and why only these and not others it does not say) provides valuable opportunities to engage critically with markets and valuation regimes in contemporary capitalism. Some selected (again without explaining and justifying which and why) examples of such ideas are helpfully and clearly discussed to help build and exemplify the central dissociation idea and this works well.

But it is not clear whether and how this pluralist 'encounter' provides *substantively clearer understanding* and *stronger and more convincing explanation* of the phenomenon of interest than that which would be provided by a more singular view of whichever kind. What is the additive and meaningful contribution of such pluralism over and above an existing and less pluralist approach? How can the different ideas be used productively to address each other's blind spots and shortfalls? The risk is that this pluralist endeavour creates a lack of clarity and even confusion, incoherence and muddle. For some readers, it may just highlight and amplify the collision, clash and contestation between such perspectives. Indeed, such constructive and respectful

disagreement and dissent can be fruitful to interpretation (Pike 2017). In the paper, it is not made sufficiently clear or obvious how such 'multiple perspectives' can be somehow resolved or integrated in coherent and meaningful ways. Or indeed whether such resolution or integration is actually needed or wanted by the research community or an unwelcome attempt at conceptual and theoretical syncretism. Bringing together such different views is certainly helpful in challenging existing perspectives and ideas and perhaps prompting unexpected and fresh developments. In this sense, pluralism does suggest open attitudes, willingness to listen and take seriously different ideas rather than some kind of agreement, even consensus, and convergence (Sunley 2012). But do we end up with an eclectic and fragmented set of concepts, each with potentially worthwhile insights, adding up to something rather less than a coherent theory of socio-spatial relations, associations and dissociations, and practices?

It is perhaps only a starting point in the paper's calls to address such challenges and stimulate 'collaboration' between such different (sub-)disciplinary communities and different perspectives that have hitherto not interacted (why is that?) While a reasonable point, this may under-estimate the substantive differences in aims, approaches, goals, and political ambitions of social science research and geographical inquiry. There is already, for example, longstanding and more recent work in economic geography and beyond engaging with the (de)construction and operation of the economy and markets that adopts a range of approaches rather

than just a more narrowly post-structuralist (and, it might be said, less pluralist) viewpoint (see, for example, Birch and Siemiatycki 2016, Bridge and Bradshaw 2017, Hall 2017, Peck 2013). It is creditable that the authors note in the conclusion that empirical work will provide the opportunity to see how the various dimensions of the framework 'work together': but nothing further is said about exactly how this might be achieved. How can the various elements derived from multiple concepts and theories be linked and related in ways that provide and deliver on their promise of clearer understanding and more convincing explanation? And, crucially, can this more pluralistic approach do this better than any more singular perspective? To be worthwhile, pluralism needs to be a means to greater explanation rather than an end in and of itself (Pike *et al.* 2016). Maybe pluralism works better within more cognate, closely related and similar fields – say, for example, in a heterodox geographical political economy (Sheppard 2011) – rather than in less cognate, distant and dissimilar areas.

Apparently stemming from its pluralist approach, the conceptual bases of value and valuation are handled loosely in the paper. Key ideas with much theoretical baggage and underlying meanings are used including brand, commodity and rent (although exchange and use value are not discussed). Their definitions, conceptual and theoretical underpinnings and implications for dissociation are dealt with somewhat superficially and not really followed through. This treatment of value and valuation creates a situation that is difficult to resolve. Dissociation is

worthwhile *and* challenging because it seeks to tread a careful line in learning from and using political-economic (asset, commodity, price, property, rent, value) *and* cultural-economic ideas (affect, emotions, ethics, identity, meaning, representation) (Pike 2017). But, again, the onus is on this pluralistic approach to show the worth and practice of how these multiple perspectives can be brought together to *enhance* understanding and explanation. The authors acknowledge that this task is part of future research but a few more clues on how to do this would have been helpful at this agenda-setting stage.

A strength of the framework is the acknowledgement of the importance of the intertwining of material *and* symbolic dimensions through the work of actors in associating and dissociating and the utilisation of tangible *and* intangible aspects. But in much of the discussion the social construction is somewhat over-played and the balance is lost. How can the worth of the framework be restored through recovering this balance and providing greater recognition of the – albeit sectorally and spatially variable – material and tangible roots to value and their interactions with social construction, symbolism and 'cultural contingency'? Proposing a more balanced approach is a real contribution of the paper but the account tilts too far in one direction. As recognised by the authors, it is an empirical question to explore such combinations and their geographies in relation to particular economic activities and their goods and services. Do the central arguments still hold, for example, in the cases of more every-day and mundane goods and services in

markets where symbolic value is less important? In addition to luxury cars, clothing and Swiss watches, for example, what about headache tablets, pet food and supermarket own-brands?

As a key contribution, uneven geographical development is given a central and important position in the construction of dissociation with 'winners' and 'losers' manifest socially and spatially across the world. While acknowledged as an arguable point, it seems over-done to claim that the upsides, success stories and 'winners' of contemporary capitalism have been given too much attention and the downsides, failures and 'losers' have been neglected. There is a strong, extensive and ongoing body of work in economic geography that reveals such social and spatial inequalities (some of it cited in the paper). Therefore, whether it is helpful and meaningful to coin a new binary and dualism with the idea of 'light' and 'dark' places is an interesting question to ponder. The emphasis upon social construction and valuation in the main argument suggest at least more ambiguous geographies of uneven social and spatial development and less clear shades of grey.

A final manifestation of the problems and perils of the paper's pluralism is evident in the conclusions. A call is made for more 'positive' and 'activist' research based upon international studies of dissociation. Certainly, a global and comparative research agenda is opened-up by this new and potentially fruitful idea. However, this call avoids and side-steps or appears unwilling to engage with the fundamental

differences in the underlying conceptual frameworks drawn upon in the paper and their politics. The more relativist and socially constructivist ideas typically deny and critique any notion of universalist, trans-historical and geographically-spanning beliefs, values and principles that might be used to inform a more 'progressive' research, activist and political agenda. Whereas political-economic understandings construct and explore exactly such things and are clearer about the bases for their normative claims. If pluralism based on such different perspectives is the conceptual and theoretical framework, then, how can such conflicting views be squared? Collaboration and dialogue might be a start but on what basis if there are fundamental and profound differences in starting points? Perhaps the answer lies in forging more balanced culturally *and politically*-grounded economic geography. If the call is for more 'critical' work on the uneven geographies of value creation in global capitalism, then arguably a less balanced and narrower cultural economic geography is poorly suited for the task.

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